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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the history and utilization of special education funding in the Green Valley Area Education Agency 14 (AEA 14). AEA 14 is the most rural AEA in Iowa and serves 22 public school districts and 1 parochial school district. AEA 14 has lagged financially due to its sparse population and low special education funding. Services such as school social work and special education counseling were limited by the financial strain. The responsibilities for these services were placed upon special education teachers. The AEA 14 director of special education resolved this financial inequity by proposing legislation to include a sparsity factor in the funding formula. Prior to the sparsity formula being initiated, the Special Education Teacher Advisory Committee was formed in 1989 to offset the lack of special education consultants. The first year the committee worked on a project dealing with the increasing numbers of at-risk students in Iowa schools. Once AEA 14 received the sparsity funding, a search for full time consultants began. However, the director of special education believed the best consultants were teachers. Six of the seven teachers serving on the committee were hired to provide consultant services outside of classroom time. It is presently the only "teacher as consultant" model in the state of Iowa. This model demonstrates that it is teachers who are best equipped to evaluate, communicate, and facilitate teacher change. (LP)

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Co-Presenter: Susan Olesen
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Teacher Consultant Model . . . . Trend of the Future

Fifteen Area Education Agencies (AEAs) were established in Iowa in 1974, to become active on July 1, 1975, to serve the needs of local Iowa school districts (LEAs) in the areas of media services, educational services, and special education. This paper will focus on the history and utilization of special education funding in Iowa and more specifically Green Valley Area Education Agency 14.

The main office is located in the southwestern part of the state in Creston, Iowa, population 8300, the largest town in AEA 14. There are satellite offices in Corning, Greenfield, Red Oak, Lamoni, and Osceola, Iowa. The area it serves is rural and largely agricultural, with some small industry. AEA 14 serves all of eight counties and parts of five others, including 22 public school districts and 1 parochial school district. AEA 14 is the most rural AEA in the state with a population of 3.2 children per square mile, compared with Iowa's most populous AEA having 22.6 children per square mile. Contained in AEA 14 are some of the least populous, poorest counties in Iowa and the United States.

The initial AEA special education funding was calculated on a per pupil amount based on the number of school age children living in an area, as well as a consideration of the amount of money spent for special education services in the LEAs prior to the establishment of the AEAs. The state then established a funding mechanism that generated monies for the LEAs and AEAs based on the number of students placed in special education and the restrictiveness of the placement. The AEAs were to serve as compliance and support service agencies to the LEAs.

AEA 14, compared to other AEAs, has historically lagged financially due to the sparse population and comparatively low special education funding prior to 1974. Consequently, before this school year (1990-91), it was the only AEA in the state to be without the services of school social workers and special education consultants, as well as some other specialists to whom adequate compensation could not be provided, even on a contractual basis. At one time AEA 14 had full time special education consultants, but when state wide budget cuts were initiated in 1979 those consultative positions were eliminated in favor of retaining direct service personnel. Consequently, every special education teacher in AEA 14 is responsible for curriculum development, teaching, academic and behavioral evaluation, collaboration with regular educators,

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parent communication, staffing organization and execution, and IEP development and implementation.

After attempts to resolve this long-standing financial inequity were made in concert with the Iowa Department of Education, the AEA 14 Director of Special Education, Harold Connolly, recognized that the only way to adjust this inequity was through legislative appropriation. He enlisted the support of area state legislators to write into the Iowa AEA funding formula a sparsity factor. In the 1989 legislative session, this formula (which would have provided AEA 14 with an additional $500,000) passed both houses of the Iowa Legislature, but was vetoed by the governor, Terry Branstad. In the 1990 session, after the governor had vetoed the entire education spending bill, which again contained the sparsity factor for AEA 14, a compromise was struck and the sparsity factor left in the bill, providing an extra $287,000 for AEA 14. The sparsity factor was not supported by the Iowa Department of Education, so it was of special political significance that the people of AEA 14 pulled together, relentlessly lobbied the legislators and the governor, and the needs of rural children in our area were recognized and AEA 14 is now able to provide a broader range of services.

Another interesting drama was played out in the Iowa Legislature last session as well when a plan was offered by the Iowa Department of Education to reorganize the AEAs. This proposal included the elimination of AEA 14. In the proposed plan, AEA 14 was to be merged with Heartland AEA 11, located near Des Moines and Loess Hills AEA 13, located in Council Bluffs. The Department contended the merger would allow our "service poor" area to have a full complement of services. Interestingly enough, neither AEA with which we were to be merged wanted us, wondering how they would be able to continue their own present level of service while providing services in our sparsely populated area as well. The people of AEA 14 were opposed to the merger, wishing to maintain their agency's particular rural personality and recognizing that lack of services related directly to funding, not unwillingness to utilize resources appropriately. The AEA merger proposal caused such a hue and cry that it was never brought to the floor of the Legislature.

Prior to the sparsity formula being initiated, Mr. Connolly had decided he would appoint a committee of experienced, master (by his definition) teachers from AEA 14 that he hoped might help fill the gap created by the absence of consultants. Though AEA 14 would still be without full time consultants, Mr. Connolly believed the teachers on the committee, as well as other teachers and professionals in the area, could be utilized as teacher consultants, who would provide on a limited basis, the kinds of services he would expect a consultant to provide. The teachers asked to participate, except for one, taught in multicategorical resource or special class with integration models, his choices reflecting the majority of instructional models in AEA 14. He spoke to the building administrators, as well as the superintendents, of the teachers he wished to involve in the project. He explained his idea and asked if he might buy some of the teachers' time from the districts where they were employed. The AEA would pay for the substitutes hired and any other expenses incurred when the teachers were asked to be gone for AEA related projects. Those administrators believed it to be a useful and unique idea and gave the go ahead for the teachers to be involved. He offered the seven teachers a $500 stipend to sit on this committee the first year and every teacher offered a seat accepted. In October of 1989, the newly formed Special Education Teacher Advisory Committee met for the first time.

By the time the Legislature and Governor provided the sparsity funding, the Committee was in full swing. At the same time the Bureau of Special Education in Iowa was in the second year of an initiative called the Renewed Service Delivery System, which focused on prereferral activity before special education placement and encouraged major cutbacks in pullout programs. Additionally it was/is an effort to deal with the ever increasing at-risk population in Iowa schools. Mr. Connolly believed the people who should judge the efficacy of the system were the direct service people who would be asked to initiate it, teachers. Consequently, the majority of the Committee's time was spent that first year visiting trial sites around the state, talking with teachers who were participating

in RSDS, and attending training sessions sponsored by the Bureau of Special Education in Iowa that were pertinent to the RSDS Initiative. This work continued into the summer.

Once the AEA received the sparsity funding, Mr. Connolly began his search for 3 full time consultants. However, he found his ability to hire was hampered by his belief, after the year with the seven teachers, that the best consultants were teachers themselves. He tried to hire the teachers from the committee, but they all preferred to stay in the classroom. He proposed to the Green Valley Board of Directors that the seven teachers on the committee be offered contracts of $5000 from which they could buy down at the rate of $14 per hour for the work they did outside of the school day in their LEAs and that their time could continue to be purchased from the LEAs to participate in trainings, travel, and to offer inservices. The board believed his plan to be an excellent utilization of resources. Six of the seven teachers who participated in the project the first year agreed to continue into the second year in the expanded program. It is presently the only "teacher as consultant" model in the state of Iowa.

This team presently provides staff development programs for both regular and special educators in AEA 14, assistance at difficult staffings, and consultation in curricular methods and materials. These services are offered to local districts at their convenience and are designed to conform with LEA goals and needs.

We believe the void occurring because of no full time consultants is being filled. We believe our services are openly received because we are not just consultants, but teachers who must implement that which we advocate. We, due to first hand knowledge, understand the roadblocks caused by scheduling, confusion, and other obstacles encountered in real life in any school building. Also we have noted teachers' willingness to share their special expertises with us and then others because they feel empowered by our empowerment. This recognition of talent, we believe, increases the collegiality and communication of teachers throughout the AEA and increases the availability of resources. Our ultimate goal is to provide the best direct service possible for all special education students in AEA 14 through training and collaboration with the teachers who must provide that service, whether they be regular educators or special educators.

We find that support for our model exists in research being done on change. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development finds that lasting learning for teachers is most likely to occur within a supportive environment that encourages practice, idea sharing among teachers, and peer observation. Additionally, change research collected by the Iowa Department of Education tells us that persons tend to change when they see others changing, particularly when the change direction is supported by valued persons, in this case fellow teachers. People tend to change to the degree they trust the motives of the person or persons attempting to induce change. Teachers tend to change to the degree that they see the change has been successful, especially if they are able to gather data for themselves.

In the fall of 1990, a needs assessment survey was sent to all certified staff in AEA 14. Major areas of interest and need were identified and our educational modules were developed around those identified areas. We offer a range of professional services with the following programs emphasized: Progress Monitoring, Teacher Assistance Teams, IEP Writing, Curriculum Adaptations, Collaboration (Suzanne Robinson's model from Kansas University), Cooperative Learning, Behavior Management, Problem Solving Approach (PSA), and Compliance Issues. Several of the modules have been offered as classes for recertification and/or college credit. We are currently involved in training in the Kansas Learning Strategies. Our first major initiative as a total committee was to invite teams, an elementary level and a secondary level team from each of the districts in the area, to an all day in-service for an overview of the available staff development modules. Prior to that several districts had invited individual members to present in-service in areas in which they had a need.

Each of the committee members brought to the committee selected areas of interest and specialization. Three of our members have recently, or are currently, serving on state level committees. Martha Pine currently serves as the teacher representative on the Iowa Department of Education's Behavior Disabilities Steering Committee, as well as a Department of Education committee formulating policy and procedure for the suspension and expulsion of handicapped students. Susan Olesen is serving on an Iowa State Education Association committee which is reviewing the implementation and effectiveness of the Renewed Service Delivery System, the new initiative in Iowa mentioned earlier in this paper. Sharon Cain served for four years as the teacher representative on the Iowa Department of Education Special Education Advisory Committee.

We, as teachers, welcome the opportunity provided to us by AEA 14 to demonstrate that the people who are best equipped to evaluate, communicate, and facilitate change are those who must ultimately effect the change in their classrooms with children every day. The recognition of our talents and abilities is serving to empower other teachers in our area to become confident of their own abilities to become better at what they already do quite well – teach.